

COMM 384: Interpreting Popular Culture

Fall 2015 / MW 10:00-11:20AM/ASC 204

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Course Description

This class was formulated with the intention to introduce you to a variety of different (critical, historical, and theoretical) approaches to examining popular culture. In this class we will explore a wide variety of case studies ranging from reality TV to animations, fake news, and YouTube and get familiar with significant debates about contemporary popular culture. We will investigate what popular culture is, what functions it seems to serve, how to critically read and interpret popular texts and practices, how it shapes and reflects cultural tastes and values, how we relate to popular culture, and how it shapes the way we think, feel, and define ourselves as individuals and social beings. We will also examine how popular culture relates to social power and control or how power and ideology operate in popular culture by focusing on critical issues of race, gender, sexuality, and class. I hope by the end of the semester you will have a theoretically rich analytical toolkit to critically “read” popular culture and to engage in sincere and intellectual conversations about popular culture that seems to matter deeply to us (whether we define ourselves as fans, active participants, or mere consumers).

Class Readings

This class has no required textbooks. All readings are posted on Blackboard. You are expected to complete readings by the start of lecture and be prepared to actively participate in class discussions.

Top Hat

We will be using the Top Hat (www.tophat.com) classroom response system in class. You will be able to submit answers to in-class questions using Apple or Android smartphones and tablets, laptops, or through text message.

You can visit tinyurl.com/TopHatStudentGuide for the Student Quick Start Guide which outlines how you will register for a TOP Hat account, as well as providing a brief overview to get you up and running on the system. An email invitation will also be sent to your school email account (if you don't receive this email, you can register by visiting our course website tophat.com/e/971494).

Top Hat will require a paid subscription, and the standard pricing for the cheapest option is \$24 for 4-months of unlimited access. For a full breakdown of all subscription options available please visit www.tophat.com/pricing.

Course Requirements

Attendance: Required

Attendance is mandatory and will be taken via Top Hat each class. Each time a new attendance session is started, Top Hat generates a random 4-digit attendance code, which is only displayed on the projected screen in our classroom. You may check in for attendance by either texting the attendance code to the Top Hat SMS Response number, or directly entering it into the provided field from your laptop or mobile device. The attendance code will be projected on screen for 30 seconds. Failure to check in for attendance will result in a marked absence. Considering that a significant amount of material covered in lecture is not in the reading and there will be frequent screenings in lecture, it is important that you attend class regularly. You will be given **three (3)** free unexcused absences. Four or more absences will result in an automatic half grade deduction from your overall grade for each unexcused absence. Missing more than seven classes without discussing the situation with the instructor **will** result in a failing grade for the course.

Excused absences are granted *only* for the following reasons: serious illness (which must be documented with a doctor's certificate), a death in the family (again, documentation is required), or, in very rare cases, a school-related event that requires your presence and that you have arranged with the professor well in advance (e.g. an out-of-town university competitive event in which you are required to participate, a religious holiday, or a job interview). In order for an absence to be excused, documentation must be provided (a note from a coach, letter scheduling the interview, etc.).

The following types of situations are NOT considered excused absences: social events, meetings of Greek or service organizations, entertaining out-of-town visitors, holiday plans, going to weddings or to visit relatives, or any other circumstance that is extracurricular and at which your attendance is optional and secondary to your schoolwork.

*If you miss an in-class screening, it is your responsibility to track down and watch the materials.

Participation (10%)

I expect you to come to class on time and be prepared to answer questions and discuss the assigned readings each week. This grade will reflect not only your participation, but also whether you have prepared the readings for thoughtful discussion in class. You should be able to respond to questions about the assigned readings and offer opinions and insight into the topics addressed. Poor attendance will adversely affect your participation grade. If you miss more than three classes or your Top Hat response rate is lower than 90%, you **will not** receive the full participation grade.

Group Presentation (10) /Write Up (5) (15%)

Early on in the semester you will divide into groups to keep track of popular culture trends and phenomena. Toward the middle of the semester, I'll ask each group to do a short in-class presentation (15 minutes with additional 5 minute for Q/A) discussing the case study in popular culture and the way it exhibits some of the themes we have discussed in class and covered in the

readings. Make sure you can provide and discuss at least one specific example in class. Your group will also hand in a write-up (2-3 pages) for the presentation. We will set the groups and schedule for presentations early in the semester. More details about the class presentation will be provided.

2 Papers (15% Each, 30%)

You will write two five page papers that provide a short analysis of a pop culture artifact (movies, advertisements, television shows, games, romance novels, etc.) that was not screened or introduced in lecture. Your argument should be supported with quotes from the readings and specific examples from your object of analysis. I will provide you with guidelines for each paper assignment.

* Late Policy: No extensions will be given unless you have truly extenuating circumstances. In these cases, you must speak with me **before** the assignment is due to make an arrangement. Technology excuses are not acceptable. **Assignments turned in late without an approved extension will be marked down a letter grade for every day late. After five days late, the assignment will earn a 0!** Please do not hesitate to contact me to discuss assignments.

Midterm Exam (20%) / Final Exam (25%)

Both exams will be a mixture of multiple choice, short answer, and short essay questions. The exams will evaluate both your understanding of the readings and topics covered in class throughout the semester and your ability to synthesize ideas across the course.

Course Grading Policy

You will receive details about each assignment/exam separately. **All assignments need to be completed and handed in on time to avoid a grade reduction. If you are unable to turn in an assignment due to illness or a personal emergency, you must provide written documentation that will allow you to be excused, or discuss your situation with me in a timely manner. Do no wait until the end of the semester to sort things out.**

In order to pass this class you will need to complete ALL of the assignments. Failure to complete one or more of them will result in an F in the class.

Grades will be assigned as follows:

A	outstanding, thoughtful and enthusiastic work
B+/B	above average work, demonstrating good insight into assignment
B-/C+	needs improvement on ideas, argument and follow through
C and below	fulfilling the bare minimum and showing little understanding of the material

Each assignment will be worth 100 points and will be converted to a percentage score depending upon the weight assigned to each. Your percentage scores won the assignments will be totaled and translated to a letter grade per the scale shown below:

A	= 100-94	C	= 76-74
A-	= 93-90	C-	= 73-70
B+	= 89-87	D+	= 69-67
B	= 86-84	D	= 66-64
B-	= 83-80	D-	= 63-60
C+	= 79-77	F	= 59-0

If you have concerns regarding a grade on a given assignment, you must appeal it in writing, stating the reasons why you feel the grade is inaccurate, within one week of receiving the graded assignment. No late appeals will be accepted for review.

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Conduct

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Section 11, *Behavior Violating University Standards* <https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the *Office of Equity and Diversity* <http://equity.usc.edu> or to the *Department of Public Safety* <http://capsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us>. This is important for the safety of the whole USC community. Another member of the university community – such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member – can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. *The Center for Women and Men* <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/> provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage <http://sarc.usc.edu> describes reporting options and other resources.

Annenberg School of Communication Academic Integrity Policy

Students are prohibited from committing or attempting to commit any act that constitutes academic misconduct. Students should not give or receive (or attempt to give or receive) unauthorized help on assignments or examinations without express permission from the instructor. You cannot turn in someone else’s work and you cannot turn in material you have used in other classes, whether at USC or elsewhere. You should also properly acknowledge and document all sources of information (e.g. quotations, paraphrases, ideas) and use only the sources and resources authorized by the instructor.

The Annenberg School of Communication maintains a commitment to the highest standards of ethical conduct and academic excellence. Any student found responsible for plagiarism, fabrication, cheating on examinations, or purchasing papers or other assignments will receive a failing grade for this course, will be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards and may be dismissed from the School of Communication.

Support Systems

A number of USC’s schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the *American Language Institute* <http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali>, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. *The Office of Disability Services and Programs*

http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations. If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, *USC Emergency Information* <http://emergency.usc.edu> will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.

Disability

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in 120 Grace Ford Salvatori Hall and is open 8:30 a.m.-5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776.

Other Classroom Policies

Getting to Class Late and Leaving Early

Late arrivals and early departures distract and disrupt class. Your professor can find them to be especially annoying and disrespectful. If you have to miss more than 15 minutes of class, either at the beginning or the end, please consider not coming and getting the notes from another student. If you have to leave 15 minutes or less before class ends, let me know before class, sit in the back of the classroom, and leave the classroom quietly.

Discriminatory Conduct (such as sexual harassment)

The University as well as this class will not tolerate discriminatory conduct. It poisons the work and learning environment of the University and threatens the careers, educational experience, and well-being of students, faculty, and staff. Such behavior will not be allowed in this classroom.

Seating and Discussion

Despite the fact that this is a large class, we love discussions and encourage you to raise your hand during lecture and ask questions, make comments, or ask for clarification of points you may not have understood. Please sit toward the front and center during lecture, so that you can hear the lecture and be heard when you ask questions. When you do ask a question or make a comment, please speak up – even if the professor can hear you, your classmates need to be able to as well.

Noise-Making Devices and Computer Use in Class

All noise-making electronic devices (cellphones, mp3 players, etc.) are disruptive. Those who plan to use your cellphone for Top Hat questions, please remember to set your cellphones into mute or vibrate at the beginning of class. Use of computer in the classroom is a privilege. You may use a computer in the classroom only for note taking and not recreation. If we notice that you are abusing this privilege by using your computer for recreational purposes (e.g. watching videos, checking emails or Facebook, etc.), we will ask you to leave and mark you as absent for that class period.

Schedule of Classes, Topics & Readings

Week One: Defining Popular Culture

Monday, 24 August: Introduction

Wednesday, 26 August:

- John Storey, Chapter 1. “What is popular culture?” in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (pp. 1-16).

Week Two: Critical Approaches to Popular Culture

Monday, 31 August:

- Neil Postman, Chapter 6. “The Age of Show Business” (pp. 83-98) and Chapter 7. ““Now...This”” (pp. 99-113) in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*

Wednesday, 2 September:

- David Grazian, Chapter 3. “Monsters, Inc.: A Critical Approach to Popular Culture” in *Mix it Up* (pp. 46-65).

Week Three: Popular Culture vs. High Culture

Monday, 7 September:

- Labor Day – No Class!

Wednesday, 9 September:

- Herbert J. Gans, Chapter 1. “The Critique of Mass Culture” in *Popular Culture & High Culture* (pp. 29-88).

Week Four: Defending Popular Culture From the Critics

Monday, 14 September:

- Steven Johnson, Part One in *Everything Bad is Good For You* (pp. 17-136).

* This is an easy read. You can skim most parts but pay close attention to the arguments in the Television section.

Wednesday, 16 September:

- Jason Mittell (2006), “Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television” in *The Velvet Light Trap* 58, pp. 29-40.

Week Five: Parody, Satire, and the Potential to Subvert

Monday, 21 September:

- Matthew A. Henry, Chapter 1. “Entertain and Subvert: Fox Television, Satirical Comedy, and *The Simpsons*” in *The Simpsons, Satire, and American Culture* (pp. 19-43).

Wednesday, 23 September:

- Geoffrey Baym, Chapter 6. “Stephen Colbert’s Parody of the Postmodern” In *Satire TV* (pp. 124-144).
- Jeffrey Jones, Chapter 6. “Changing the Conversation: *The Daily Show*’s Interviews and Interrogations” in *Entertaining Politics* (pp. 111-143).

Week Six: Selling “Cool,” Marketing to “Youth”

Monday, 28 September:

- Malcolm Gladwell (1997), “[The Coolhunt](#)” in *New Yorker* (17 March).
- Naomi Klein, Chapter 3. “Alt.Everything: The Youth Market and the Marketing of Cool” in *No Logo* (pp. 63-86).

Wednesday, 30 September:

- Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, Chapter 7. “From Status-Seeking to Coolhunting” in *Nation of Rebels: Why Counterculture Became Consumer Culture* (pp. 188-220).

Paper Assignment #1 Due!

Week Seven: Buying Nostalgia, Reading Romance

Monday, 5 October:

- Lincoln Geraghty, Chapter 8. “(Re)Constructing Childhood Memories: Nostalgia, Narrative and the Expanded Worlds of Lego Fandom” in *Cult Collectors* (pp. 162-179).

Wednesday, 7 October:

- Janice Radway, Chapter 22, “Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature” in *The Audience Studies Reader* (pp. 219-225).
- Kumarini Silva et al., “Commentary and Criticism on *Fifty Shades of Grey*,” in *Feminist Media Studies* (pp. 556-570).

Week Eight: Fandom

Monday, 12 October

- Henry Jenkins, Chapter 1. ““Get a Life!”: Fans, Poachers, Nomads” In *Textual Poachers* (pp. 62-82).

Wednesday, 14 October

- Suzanne Scott (2013), “Fangirls in Refrigerators: The Politics of (In)Visibility in Comic Book Culture” in *Transformative Works and Culture*.
- Venetia Laura Delano Robertson (2013), “Of Ponies and Men: *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* and the Brony Fandom” in *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 17(1), pp. 21-37.

Week Nine: Celebrity Culture, Gossip, and Tabloidization

Monday, 19 October:

Mid-term Exam!

Wednesday, 21 October:

- Neal Gabler, Chapter Four. “The Human Entertainment” in *Life: The Movie* (pp. 143-191).
- “[The Celebrity Economy](#)” (2012) In *New York Magazine* (29 January).

- Anne Helen Petersen (2014), "[The Down and Dirty History of TMZ](#)" In *Buzzfeed News* (24 July).

Week Ten: YouTube (and its Stars)

Monday, 26 October

- José van Dijck, Chapter 6. "YouTube: The Intimate Connection Between Television and Video Sharing" in *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (pp. 110-131).
- Aymar Jean Christian (2011), "The Problem of YouTube" in Flowtv.org (<http://flowtv.org/2011/02/the-problem-of-youtube/>).

Wednesday, 28 October

- Rex Sorgatz (2008), "The Microfame Game" in *New York Magazine* (<http://nymag.com/news/media/47958/>).
- Jean Burgess & Joshua Green, Chapter 3. "YouTube's Popular Culture" in *YouTube* (pp. 38-57).

Week Eleven: Playing Games

Monday, 2 November:

- Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, & Greig de Peuter, Chapter 11. "Designing Militarized Masculinity: Violence, Gender, and the Bias of Game Experience" in *Digital Play* (pp. 246-268).
- Aubrey Anable (2013), "Casual Games, Time Management, and the Work of Affect" in *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology 2* (<http://adanewmedia.org/2013/06/issue2-anable/>)

Wednesday, 4 November:

- Sarah Banet-Weiser (2015), "Popular Misogyny: A Zeitgeist" in *Culture Digitally* (<http://culturedigitally.org/2015/01/popular-misogyny-a-zeitgeist/>).
- Mia Consalvo (2012), "Confronting Toxic Gamer Culture: A Challenge for Feminist Game Studies Scholars" in *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology 1* (<http://adanewmedia.org/2012/11/issue1-consalvo/>).

Week Twelve: Intersection of Race, Gender, Class, and Sexuality I

Monday, 9 November

- bell hooks (1992), Chapter 2. "Eating the Other" in *Black Looks* (pp. 21-39).
- Keara Goin (2013), "The Others on Bravo: The Entertainment Value of the Eccentric Ethnic Character" in Flowtv.org (<http://flowtv.org/2013/09/the-others-on-bravo/>).

Wednesday, 11 November

- Daphne A. Brooks (2006), "Suga Mama, Politicized" in *The Nation* (<http://www.thenation.com/article/suga-mama-politicized/>)
- Aisha Durham (2012), "'Check on It': Beyoncé, Southern Booty, and Black Femininities in Music Videos" in *Feminist Media Studies* 12(1), pp. 35-49.

Week Thirteen: Intersection of Race, Gender, Class, and Sexuality II

Monday, 16 November

- Maria Pragaggiore & Diane Negra, Chapter 3. “Keeping Up with the Aspirations: Commercial Family Values and the Kardashian Brand” in *Reality Gendervision* (pp. 76-96).

Wednesday, 18 November

- Michael J. Lee & Leigh Moscovitz (2012), “The “Rich Bitch: Class and Gender on *The Real Housewives of New York*”” in *Feminist Media Studies*
- Pier Dominguez (2015), ““I’m Very Rich, Bitch!”: The Melodramatic Money Shot and the Excess of Racialized Gendered Affect in the *Real Housewives* Docusoap” in *Camera Obscura* 30(1), pp. 155-183.

Week Fourteen: Intersection of Race, Gender, Class, and Sexuality III

Monday, 23 November:

- J. Jack Halberstam, Chapter 3. “Gaga Sexualities: The End of Normal” in *Gaga Feminism* (pp. 65-94).

Paper Assignment #2 Due!

Wednesday, November 25:

No Class – Thanksgiving Break (November 25 – 29)!

Week Fifteen: Popular Culture in a Global Context

Monday, 30 November:

- Christina Yano (2009), “Wink on Pink: Interpreting Japanese Cute as It Grabs the Global Headlines” in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, pp. 681-688.
- Anne Allison, Chapter 3. “Cuteness as Japan’s Millennial Product” in *Pikachus’ Global Adventure* (pp. 34-49).

Wednesday, 2 December:

- Kent A. Ono & Jungmin Kwon, Chapter 12. “Re-worlding Culture? YouTube as a K-Pop Interlocutor” in *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global* (pp. 199-214).

Final Exam Review

Week Sixteen: Finals Week

Monday, 14 December:

Final Exam! (8:00-10:00 AM)